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ABSTRACT

Recognizing and appreciating culturally diverse views of what is best for children is important, as underscored by the views of childhood evident in early childhood education programs in China. Families and schools in modern China experience unique social and political pressures, the most obvious of which is the "one child policy," which runs counter to traditional cultural values and creates ambivalence among parents who must sacrifice personal happiness for the common good. Parents who grew up with several siblings are mandated to have only one child. These parents are concerned that their children are lonely and are missing opportunities to develop socially desirable behaviors, such as sharing. Schools attempt to counteract perceived overindulgence of only children by sparsely equipping toy shelves so children are encouraged to share, wait their turn, and negotiate with peers. Popular residential programs for children 2 to 6 years accommodate child care needs of working parents. Most early childhood teachers hold high school diplomas or degrees from programs equivalent to American junior colleges. Their preservice education focuses on the dramatic, performing, and visual arts and practical skills emphasized in early childhood programs. The Chinese educational philosophy is based on the belief that learning should occur through continual, careful shaping and molding and that creativity is demonstrated only after the child has perfected prescribed and approved performances. (KDFB)

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Experiencing Multiculturalism First Hand: Looking at Early Childhood Education in China Teaches Us About Ourselves

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I had the opportunity to visit China with a group of early childhood education professionals in the fall of 1993. During that trip I learned first-hand that childhood in modern China is very different from childhood in modern main-stream America. As I talked with early childhood professionals and visited child care programs in Bejing, Hangzhou, and Shanghai it became apparent that there are distinct cultural differences in how families and schools in modern China and modern America view children and childhood. My experiences in China demonstrated in a concrete and personal way that the goals we embrace for ourselves and our children are shaped by the values and beliefs we absorb during a lifetime of social interactions. In short, they are part of our culture.

This two-week tour took us to a number of China's most modern cities. We learned about the culture, history and geography that shape this part of the world. We visited a number of exemplary programs for young children, and had the opportunity to visit with the teachers and directors of some of those programs. These experiences taught me powerful lessons about how differently our cultures define childhood, parenting, and teaching. This trip clearly demonstrated to me the importance of recognizing and appreciating culturally diverse views of defining what is "best" for children. It helped me experience "multiculturalism" first-

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hand.

The programs and practices I saw during my travels reflected the affects of a number of the unique social and political pressures felt by families and schools in modern China. The first, and most obvious pressure exerted on families, is the official "one child policy." Since 1979, the Chinese government has limited the size of families in an effort to curb out-of-control population growth. To understand how this change in families is viewed by young men and women it is helpful to understand their personal experiences. Just one generation ago Chairman Mao was encouraging men and women to have large families. He thought that families with six, seven, or more children would assure China the manpower they would need to become an equal partner in the modern community of nations. His policies seemed to overlook the fact that with each pair of working hands also came an additional hungry mouth to feed. Food shortages and overcrowding quickly put increased demands on China's sagging infrastructure. The official reaction to this population boom was the implementation of family planning initiatives, which began in 1970. Those early efforts encouraging men and women to limit the size of their families met with limited success, so in 1979 the government enacted the one-child law. This policy exerts substantial social and economic pressure on young families to have just one child. Unless the first-born child has a birth defect, or turns out to be twins, a second child may be denied medical and educational services, parents are likely to face a fine equivalent to ten years' wages, and may even lose their jobs.

It is interesting to consider what having one child means to parents who, themselves, grew up with six or more siblings. The homes of their youth were likely to be crowded, busy

places. Family give-and-take probably meant that, as children, today's parents looked after, and were looked after, by any number of brothers and sisters, and when their extended family got together it was undoubtedly quite a crowd. Knowing that most of today's parents grew up in large close-knit families makes it is easy to appreciate why urban polls have shown that 75% of the husbands and wives questioned would prefer to have two children rather than the state-mandated single child (Strom, Strom, & Xie, 1995). Parents commonly express their concern that their only children are lonely and are missing out on valuable opportunities to demonstrate caring, sharing, and other socially desirable behaviors. The government one-child policy asks parents to create a family very different from the one where they grew up. It runs counter to traditional cultural values, and creates for parents a great deal of ambivalence as they are forced to sacrifice their personal happiness for the common good.

Some observers lament that the one-child policy has produced "an emerging generation of spoiled, lazy, selfish, self-centered and overweight children" (Deane, 1992, p. 216). This phenomenon is often called the "4-2-1 syndrome" - four doting grandparents, two overindulgent parents, all investing their hopes and ambitions on one spoiled child (Deane, 1992; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). We saw evidence of the schools' attempts to counteract what they consider parents' and grandparents' overindulgence of young children. It was clear, for example, at the June 1st Kindergarten in Beijing, that these teachers took seriously their responsibility to give children the opportunity, indeed to create the expectation, that children would share toys and materials and take responsibility for themselves and their belongings. Toy shelves in this school were sparsely equipped, and we learned that instead of providing

duplicates of popular toys as American preschools are likely to do, these classrooms were intentionally under-supplied so that children have to share, wait their turn, and negotiate with their peers during play. What's more, instead of adding additional materials as the school year progressed, we were told that these teachers periodically removed toys so that there was even more pressure on children to share, co-operate, and wait their turn. This approach presents quite a contrast when we compare it to the stimulating environments our teachers work to create by providing children with a selection of frequently-modified developmentally appropriate materials.

Another striking characteristic of child care for preschool children which we were able to observe first-hand was the popularity of residential programs for 2-to-6 year-olds. It is a given that everyone in China works full time. That means that all mothers need to find reliable child care once their children reach toddlerhood. One option, of course, is for children to spend their days with their grandmothers, but progressive parents who want the best for their children much prefer them to be enrolled in residential boarding schools. This practice shocked our group of American early childhood professionals who expressed opinions similar to those observed by Goldman in 1977, "Americans . . . are horrified by the idea of boarding programs for young children because we believe that children can be scarred for life by the premature severing of the mother-child bond" (reported by Tobin, Wu, and Davidson, 1989, p. 103). It is important to realize, however, that what we were experiencing was a conflict in core values. We were having an authentic multicultural experience that challenged us to think carefully about what we think is "right" for children. We had to learn to keep our minds open

to understand that parents from various cultures try hard to make the "right" choices for their children. It was a challenge to visit dormitories full of thirty or forty little beds, lined up one-next-to-the-other in neat rows, each with a quilt carefully folded at its foot, and to force ourselves to suspend judgement. We had to stop saying "oh, those poor little children, away from their mothers and fathers all day and all night" and to, instead, keep an open mind. We worked hard to understand that parents' values and goals are accurate reflections of their cultures and the experiences of generations of parental wisdom (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993). Visiting boarding schools in Beijing and Shanghai showed us that teachers can do a good job caring for and caring about young children day in and day out. Those children's experiences are surely different from those of typical 20-th century American children, but who's to say one approach is better than another?

Our visits to Chinese schools also gave us insights into the teacher preparation priorities and practices while showing us examples of popular young children's curricula. Visiting the Welfare Kindergarten in Hangzhou made it clear that dramatic, performing and visual arts are emphasized both in teachers' preservice education and in classrooms for young children. During our study sessions we learned that most teachers who work in classrooms with young children come with high school diplomas, or have graduated from a 2-year program equivalent to those found in American technical or junior colleges. Their preparation for practice emphasizes practical skills more than theoretical knowledge. Their preservice education is also likely to have included courses in music, dance, and painting or drawing that are not part of their American counterparts' curricula.

We saw teachers' abilities to dance and sing when we observed music, dance and creative movement activities. We also visited an art lesson at the Welfare Kindergarten in Hangzhou that impressed us with the children's mastery of the materials as well as their artistic technique. In this lesson we watched children as young as five or six use materials expertly. Their art room was set up with large, low tables. The children stood comfortably as they worked side-by-side. We even saw two girls collaborating on one painting - one child worked on the sky while the other drew what was on the ground. These children were painting on thin rice paper with black calligraphy ink, cakes of colorful tempera, graceful calligraphy brushes and large buckets of water. They did not wear smocks, but instead worked confidently and neatly without tearing the thin paper, spilling the water or dripping the paints. They were drawing mostly fish, tigers, and human figures which they had first outlined with black calligraphy ink, and were now filling using a variety of artful brushstrokes and patterns. We surmised that they had been taught how to use these materials effectively, an impression we learned was correct when we had the opportunity to talk with the school's director.

This experience gave us insights into how the Chinese view creativity and artistry. The Chinese believe that the time to demonstrate creativity is *after* the young artist has perfected prescribed and approved performances (Gardner, 1989). That's why we saw various renditions of the same pictures, children were drawing what they were expected to draw. Master artists are expected to create variations on the artistic cannon after they have demonstrated their competence with the standard forms. This is opposite from the modern Western view of

creativity. The developing artist who comes from a Western tradition is likely to create a bold and innovative style, and then may evolve toward more traditional and classical works. Gardner calls this the contrast between the Eastern "evolutionary" view of creativity and the Western "revolutionary" one (Gardner, 1989, p. 55). We were seeing young artists tackling the forms they would be expected to draw well if they were going to continue their artistic training.

One picture from our visit to this art lesson stands out as an exemplar of the Chinese view of education. It clearly illustrates differences not just in the art room but between the American and Chinese educational philosophies. This picture is one in a series that shows a round-cheeked, dark-haired 5-or-6-year-old, wearing a bright red dress, who is painting an orange tiger in the middle of a large sheet of paper. She's working on using the side of her brush to make the tiger's stripes broad and even. We see the child's concentration in her eyes, in the purposefulness of her work, even the tip of her tongue is peaking out between her tight-set lips. We also see her teacher's well-timed helping hand guiding the child's careful brushstrokes. She is giving her young student just the help she needs to make this drawing one she can be proud of. Gardner (1989) would probably remark that we are seeing teaching in the best Chinese tradition, this teacher was *ba zhe shou jiao* - "teaching by holding her hand." She was demonstrating the Chinese belief that "learning should take place by continual careful shaping and molding" (Gardner, 1989, p. 55). I left that classroom reevaluating the free-choice, hands-off, explore-on-your-own art activities that we so often offer young children. It made me wonder if we should always promote the art process more than the

children's product. I saw a value in teaching children techniques and skills to make their creations successful and appealing in their eyes.

As we headed home, it was interesting for this group of early childhood educators to reflect about how what we saw in China was similar, and how it was different, from the programs we had left behind at home. We gained insights into why some families' child rearing practices were very different from our own. We learned to observe carefully and non-judgmentally when we saw teaching that was very different from how we describe "best practice." I suspect that others came away, as I did, with more than the snapshots, slide shows, and mementoes we carried in our luggage. We gained a better understanding of authentic multiculturalism from this experience with a culture and educational system very different from our own.

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